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without realizing that these were usually passed from tribe to tribe. The process of transmission not only produced a gradual alteration of substance, but — since each proclaiant gave his tale an immediacy it did not usually deserve and assumed it had sprung into being not far from where he had heard it — also produced a foreshortened idea of time and distance. Frenchmen, therefore, had no way of knowing that the “ill-smelling inland sea” was probably Lake Winnipeg, a large body of water, edged by mud flats and marshes, in what is now Manitoba. It lay nowhere near the Pacific Ocean, and the nearest point of the Missouri was 300 miles to the southwest of the lake.

Indians tended, while reworking geography, to endow the wilderness with all sorts of wondrous civilizations akin to the one that had lured Coronado to Kansas. In the early 18th Century, for instance, the French explorer Étienne Veniard, Sieur de Bourgmont, ventured a few hundred miles up the lower Missouri in

full expectation of finding
dwarfs who had eyes like
lived on the inland sea.
boots studded with gold
meet them, he remained
deeper into the West
that they would be found

White men sometimes
selves — although the
much greater suspicion
ew Sagean, a Frenchman
wild flight of fancy who
ny peninsula in 1701
somewhat dated; he was
by English pirates after
Sieur de la Salle — at the
mouth of the Missouri
Jolliet. But now he feared
that he had kept locked